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**Intervention of Politics, Ethics, and Violence in James Coetzee's
*Dusklands, Age of Iron, and Waiting for the Barbarians***

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Abstract

As history evinces any rebellious revolution that seeks to overturn the oppressive structures gives rise to a number of subject positions shaping the movement and its ideology. The innate nature of violence of such revolutions complicate the idea of ethics and politics subject to human lives at both the ends: the oppressor and the oppressed. James Coetzee's fiction written during the apartheid regime explores this strenuous terrain through positioning of his white narrators. The narratorial viewpoints expressed through the lens of politics and ethics reveals a much more

intense nature of guilt imprinted in the history colonial oppression. The article investigates such positions in the three of Coetzee's fictions namely *Dusklands*, *Age of Iron*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to understand a colonial framework as well as critiquing by ethically underpinning it.

Key words: Postcolonial, apartheid, violence, ethics, history

The significance of James Coetzee's fictions within a post-colonial and postmodernist framework is well documented. The intersection of post-colonial and postmodernist reading of Coetzee's problematic and oblique fictions has produced a range of critical enquiry into the nature aesthetics, ethics, politics, and violence. The defense against the claim that Coetzee has been a non-political writer or unlike his contemporaries, such as Nadine Gordimer, has not treated the issue of apartheid in South Africa and its oppressive structures with a left-political bent has been offered by a number of critics such as David Atwell, David Attridge, Dominic Head and others.

Coetzee is indeed intensely involved with political issues, while at the same time deeply engaged with the aesthetic nature in his narrative fictions. As against the realist mode of representation Coetzee's use of postmodernist techniques such as allegory, pastiche, parody, and his oblique bent of writing is also invested with the nature of textuality itself. Interestingly, the blend of ethical component features prominently in his fiction, more particularly with the ethics of 'representation' molded in his idiosyncratic style. With the issue of ethics the existence of violence in Coetzee's fiction and the way it has been represented generates a series of political underpinnings which is central to his politics. The intention of this paper is to underscore this politics by delving into the philosophical reflections on violence. This uneasy coexistence of

violence and ethics at the same time treats the issue of memory, myth, conscious and self-critique in a critical post-colonial framework. A simultaneous analysis of Coetzee's early fiction will inform the body of this essay to reflect upon the aforementioned themes.

Understanding Philosophy of Violence

Walter Benjamin's underpinning in *Critique of Violence* of the transformative nature of divine violence to meet subversive socio-political agendas provides an interesting development about the ethicality of violence in terms of means and ends debate. The essay is in line of the argument of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* who advocates the element of spiritual sense in its association with 'pure' violence and energy. His incessant invoking of the myth of general strike provides the paradigms of intuition and energy for the rebellious socialist movement to achieve success.

Benjamin's use of the word 'critique' understood in the Kantian tradition of evaluation and estimation and not simply having a negative connotation generates multiple meanings of violence itself by distinguishing power and force; its nature (either revolutionary or state-sponsored); and the concept of legal and divine violence. Defining violence "by the concepts of law and justice" (Benjamin 277) Benjamin tries to articulate the tenability of violence as a means to achieve just ends which binds the moral or ethical attribute to it.

Through a deconstruction of the historical succession of violence Benjamin makes some important distinctions. One is between natural law and positive law, he says, "...this thesis of natural law that regards violence as a natural datum is diametrically opposed to that of positive law, which sees violence as a product of history." (Benjamin 278). Natural law that concerns itself with the justice of ends and positive law with just means underpin a relationship of

justifications as, “If natural law can judge all existing law only in criticizing its ends, so positive law can judge all evolving law only in criticizing its means.” (Benjamin 278). Notwithstanding such a distinction for a critique of violence, Benjamin moves towards another criteria where he distinguishes “sanctioned violence and unsanctioned violence.” (Benjamin 279). He goes on with the binaries of lawmaking violence and law-preserving violence. The former attribute of violence directs itself towards natural ends exemplified in the war between two nations and the use of violence to sustain their might geographically, forming new borders while erasing the previous ones. The latter attribute of violence as Benjamin says is clearly exemplified through general conscriptions to meet the legal ends. However a suspension of both kinds of violence for Benjamin appears in capital punishment and police force where violence systematically takes the forefront for domination even when the situation does not demand. In the process it gives birth to new laws or decrees whereby the state re-affirms itself when violence is simply served in the hands of force and law.

When Benjamin establishes the relationship between law and justice he associates the former with the principle of mythic lawmaking and the latter with the principle of divine end-making. By placing the notion of justice outside the realm of law he elevates the idea of just ends driven by a force or violence which is religious and pure in nature. It chimes with the Sorrelian argument of the notion of general strike where violence is seen to be heroic in nature uncorrupted by personal ends and which shuns the negotiation tactics of the bourgeois. But a humanitarian critique can complicate this conflation of divine justice with human power while assessing the just manifestation of the so called divine violence.

Benjamin underscores the expiatory power of violence which is not visible to men as law-destroying. An element of sacrifice is central to divine violence. Unless divine violence is

bastardized by myth with the use of law, the separation of the criteria for means and ends is sustained according to Benjamin. Unlike mythic violence it does not conflate them. Benjamin fervently promotes the idea of revolution when he says “But if the existence of violence outside law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means.” (Benjamin 300).

An appeal to revolutionary struggle means to overturn the oppressive structures and regime which bears complex ramifications not just from a humanitarian aspect that forbids killings and violence, but also the efficacy of such a struggle to overturn the structures of power that are working under subtle guise of a democratic or liberalist framework. While both Sorrel and Benjamin see the expiatory power of violence, unalloyed by mythic law or personal motives, Franz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), expostulates a contradictory framework with violence as a necessity on one hand and violence as an inevitable option on the other to fight the colonial rule. Violence as a process of decolonization and violence as a necessary process to fight colonization intend to bring a crucial problematic in Fanon’s theory of violence. In the section “Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness” he underscores the importance of an organized means of revolt and action by the natives through education and fitting methodology to take on the struggle against colonialism. His emphasis on the natives’ structuring of their own methods and value must also be deeply invested with a sense of pure sentiment behind it, the spontaneity which when given a coherent approach would be able to uproot the colonial rule. K. Balgopal, who was social and political activist, approaches the question of violence from a humanitarian position and raises profound concerns on the use of violence whether it is state-sponsored or systematic violence undertaken by those to subvert the legal structures of

oppression as he says in the essay, “Political Violence and Human Rights: The case of the naxalite movement in A.P.”, “on both sides it is weak and the vulnerable that get injured.” (Balgopal 2-3). As often is the case the systematic violence consumes its own social base more than the enemy’s one, it also “creates a gap between the leaders and the led that in turn enlarges the question ever present in human affairs about the congruence between ends and means.” (Balgopal 3). It is however true that violent mode of revolt becomes inevitable in rebel movements and here the task of humanitarian movement becomes more than important which sees with distrust any violent upheaval whether political or social.

In the essay, “Reflections on violence and non-violence in political movements in India”, Balagopal speaks of peaceful mobilizations which keep alive the dimension of critique which according to him is essential as “against an opponent who operates in a universe of intelligent rationality.” (Balgopal 3). But bringing in a qualification of such an approach he accords that such methods are even more ineffective than the violent ones to fight the oppressiveness of a system. This in turn brings to the vocation of activism where in the failure of any concrete results turns the activist to violent means and assumes its inevitable requirement for the situation whatsoever. However Balagopal is also against such simplistic turns and short cuts which cannot be in sync with the desired results. This then again takes us back to involvement with human rights movement whose impartial outlook to any power wielding form of agitation accounts for the question of democratic norms, its use of force for a concerned people and also with the ethical awareness of those involved in it.

Such philosophical underpinnings on violence we have seen are not without their own dilemmas and ambiguity where the domain of politics and ethics sit uncomfortably upon. These interventions with violence and ethics have gone into my understanding of the nature of

Coetzee's early fiction written during the apartheid infested South Africa and bears on the themes of post-colonialism where the play of memory, myth and, conscious not just critically deconstruct the imperial and colonial ideologies but also show within the contemporary context their renewed relevance to critique the modern structures of power and force.

The following section will undertake a study of three novels by James Coetzee namely *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Age Iron* (1990) along with some critical enquiry with the modern philosophical consideration on violence and ethics.

In Coetzee's narrative the blend of aesthetics, ethics and, politics explore a peculiar position of liminality of the narrators where these domains overlap each other. This is a representative feature of the fragmentariness of the liberal white consciousness in a society that bears the scars of colonial and imperial atrocities. This can be seen specifically in the narrators of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* where the white self not only tussles with the ethicality of representation of the self and the other in the society but also coming to terms with own complicity with a problematic history of colonial and apartheid structures respectively. This complicity however also clashes with a white liberalist attitude of the narrator who at the same time wishes to dissociate himself/herself with such structures but ultimately fails to do so. This theme of complicity Coetzee takes up in his first novel *Dusklands* representing in a much more flagrant way which does not clash with a liberal ideology but the ultimate failure of the consciousness features prominently resulting in psychological breakdown of the two narrators in the two separate sections namely "The Vietnam Project" and "The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". The legitimacy of the narration of Coetzee's central white narrators in these fictions which occupies a dominant front sidelining the other is questioned by Coetzee either by a

conscious stricken tryst with the ethical and the political or often pathological representation of the same self.

To understand an identity crisis of the sorts in these narrations I intend to read Paul Ricoeur's essay "Fragile Identity: Respect for the Other and Cultural Identity" to shed light upon the fragmentariness of the white self. In the essay Ricoeur gives two causes for the fragility of identity. First he says is its "difficult relationship with time" (Ricoeur 82) and history. Psychologically investing oneself with the past, one which is mired in violence and oppression to achieve a sense of concrete grounding becomes problematic. The post-colonial paradigm also puts an important argument in this regard whereby it becomes inescapable for a colonized subject to breach the tenets of manipulative history of the imperial or colonial rule and look for one's own indigenous history. It could involve re-invoking the cultural and mythical traditions where locating and at the same dissociating with the colonial overlap is essential to de-colonize one's self. Coetzee's ethical enquiry is initiated by fragmenting the white psyche whose connection and complicity with the colonial and imperial rule is shown.

In section one of *Dusklands* we have Eugene Dawn who works as a mythographer working in America and preparing the Vietnam Report on the broadcast propaganda concerning war with Vietcong. The second part comprises chiefly of the narration of historical Jacobus Coetzee, a colonial explorer in South Africa during the 1760s, represents his expeditions and encounter with Namaqua's land. By going to the roots of imperialism and colonialism Coetzee on the one hand blasts the myth of American democracy and also charts the genealogy of the South African apartheid history. Coetzee's impulse towards this historicity is also indicated in *Doubling the Point* where he admits in an interview with David Atwell that while working on *Dusklands* his intention was to look at "the spectacle of what was going in Vietnam..." (Atwell

27) and also to locate in the South African history “the exploration of Southern Africa”. Both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee’s complicity with the colonial system is being condemned through their ultimate psychological breakdown.

Dawn makes it clear that in order to counter the forces in Vietnam the propaganda must act “within its cultural framework or else eradicate its culture and impose new structures.” (Coetzee 20). In this psychological warfare Dawn’s propagandist appeal to reconfigure the mythography in order to oppose the counter forces in Vietnam is rendered as a critique of this rationalist project of modern warfare by his eventual mental breakdown. The colonizer knows of the strength of brotherhood of the opponent inspired by a belief in cultural myths that ensures the unity of rebellious struggle as Dawn asserts “The myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers.” (Coetzee 24). And so it must be counteracted not through counterforce which the myth predicts but through a “propagation of new mythology.” (Coetzee 25). Coetzee’s representation of violence vis-a-vis his narrative form is crucial in understanding the exploding of the narrator’s psyche. It is also relevant to assess to what extent does such representation affect the reader’s mind. In Dawn’s case the photographs that he keeps which is his obsession and which keeps him inspired to undertake the imperialist propagandist project offer a critical disjunction in his psyche and at the same time brings about an ethical scrutiny of representing violence while not being thoroughly moralistic about it. The first picture depicts a sergeant copulating with a Vietnamese woman who Dawn suggests could be a child. It is indeed an image of rape critiquing masculinity. The picture is ironically titled “Father Makes Merry with Children”. The second picture shows two sergeants who are showing off towards the camera the severed head of three Vietnamese soldiers which are indeed trophies won in a battle. Dawn’s peculiar response to it is profoundly problematic as he finds sadistic pleasure in such acts of

dehumanization. He finds the severed heads ridiculous and giggle at imagining the mothers carrying the dead sons head in a packet “like a small purchase from supermarket?” (Coetzee 16). The third picture is a still from a film which Dawn has screened. The movie shows a camp commander moving about the field and as he jabs with his cane the prisoner in the cage and utters the words “Bad man” and “Communist”. Dawn possesses two magnified print of the prisoner’s face and feels the surface of the print with his fingertips. Dawn’s failure to access the picture which is “yielding no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man” (Coetzee 16-17) is aptly seen by Dominic Head as his desire which is similar to that of colonial domination. The fusing of “US imperialism, technology and the experience of postmodernity” (Head 33) indeed implies “Coetzee’s significance in contemporary thought” (Head 33) which invokes the seething violence of the imperialist mission.

The ethicality of representing such grotesque details is eventually manifested in the mental breakdown of Eugene Dawn and his dubious pathological condition which severs his relationship with his wife and his subsequent kidnapping and killing of his son Martin. These acts not only expose the pseudo-rationality of his project but of any imperial project for that matter. It uncovers its latent violence through propagandist workings and its catastrophic rendering.

Ricoeur gives a second sense of the fragility of identity which is “the sense of menace in our encounter with the other” (Ricoeur 84). He posits how an encounter with the other becomes dangerous for one’s own collective or individual memory. The possibility of the other having a same existence as yours exerts an inevitable pressure upon one’s own identity which becomes “so fragile that it cannot put up with or stand the fact that others lead their lives, understand themselves, and inscribe their own identity in the web of life in different ways than we do”

(Ricouer 84). I argue that while this fragile identity puts the one in a dialectical position to the other it also challenges one's mode of perception and criticality towards life. In *Age of Iron* the narrator, Mrs. Curren, who is purportedly writing in a confessional mode of a letter, offers an intricate study to the concepts associated with the white liberalist mindset. Her encounter with Vercueil and with other characters involved in a rebellious dissent against the apartheid regime gives her a plinth to encounter her own dilemmas about the horrors of wars. Coetzee uses this interface to establish an ethical ground for violence either to be supported or condemned to fight the oppressiveness of the apartheid regime. While Mrs. Curren repeatedly shuns the war and violence it perpetuates, "A war without mercy, without limits. A good war to miss" (Coetzee 33-34), her inevitability to articulate the crimes in Guguletu, the base camp of the Black rebels, complicates her ethical stance as she says, "to speak of this, you would need the tongue of a god" (Coetzee 65). She wishes to go away from the scene of rage and violence where a number of young comrades have been brutally killed by the state militia.

She condemns Bheki's (her maid Florence's son) involvement in this violent struggle when he ought to be going to school and making his future as for her "Apartheid is not going to die tomorrow or the next day. He is ruining his future." (Coetzee 45). But Bheki's assertion that the schools are to make them fit for this system turns the table around. Mrs. Curren's realization that the choice for Bheki and others is indeed between the destruction of apartheid or going to school puts into question the ethical stand adopted by her. After Bheki's death she realizes her obscure liminal position as whether she has a right to sit by Florence, Bheki's mother, and cry on the horrific death of her son.

When the police squad visits her house to capture John, Bheki's friend, her futile attempt to rescue John exposes an incorrigible attitude of the officials who have taken upon themselves

to get rid of the rebels in order to defend the larger interests of others. Such political rationality that sanctions violence as Peter DeAngelis would argue in “The logic of Violence: Foucault on how power kills”, “bestows upon it an inexorable logic” (DeAngelis 172). What DeAngelis calls “the aura of obviousness...” when violence becomes historically “sedimented and taken for granted...” (DeAngelis 172), is something which Coetzee is also representing and in *Age of Iron* as it also bears itself upon in Mrs. Curren’s critical self examination.

Her conversation with Mr. Thabane over phone about comradeship presents us two different worldviews. While Mrs. Curren would have him believe the futility of deaths in war, Mr. Thabane on the other hand elevates the deaths of his comrades as a sacrifice. Later on while disgusted at the treatment of the police squad, Mrs. Curren opens up to Verduciel and says, “What right have I to opinions about comradeship or anything else? What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble? To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is...nothing.” (Coetzee 105). She comes to accept the indifference with which she was being treated by Florence and others but never quite changes her opinion about the futility of war. She repeatedly questions her entitlement to stop black comrades from waging a war and finally understands her complicity in these violent times as she admits, “So long ago that I was born into it. It is a part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.” (Coetzee 106). Coetzee once again intricately delineates the historical crime done in the name of progress by the whites which never failed to show its gory face time and again within the structures of apartheid oppression. The crime which Mrs. Curren claims “...committed in my name” (Coetzee 106) can never dissociate her with this lineage and so the price to be paid for it must be “...paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner.” (Coetzee 106). And she accepted that.

The fragile identities that we have seen constructed so far, of Eugene Dawn and Mrs. Curren is then enmeshed in yet another cause for this crisis, a third cause as Ricoeur says which is “the inheritance of founding violence” (Coetzee 87). The inheritance wounds the psyche which accepts the complicity and yet seeks to dissociate itself from it.

He points towards a crucial aspect of this founding violence which is torture, being state sanctioned, and which intends to dehumanize the other. Torture is to be seen as yet another mode of conflating the individual and collective memory whereby the one who perpetuates the torture transfers the humiliation of a wounded past so that the one persecuted must “lose all self-respect to come to hate herself/himself” (Ricoeur 88). In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee exemplifies the conflict to apprehend the wounded past in the figure of the Magistrate. At a structural level the novel is an allegory where an Empire outpost is shown to be living under the constant threat of an attack from the barbarians. The attack which is nothing yet but a rumor gives unwarranted freedom to the Empire to distrust the local natives and persecute and torture them forcibly for having threatening links or knowledge about an anticipated attack. Many critics have not failed to see the text’s relevance within the context of South African apartheid regime. When a tribe of local fishermen are being held captives the Magistrate fails to comprehend the logic behind their torturous treatment at hands of Colonel Joll whose motive is to get the “truth” about the events of attack. Magistrate’s wounded consciousness is well represented when he visits the torture chamber which he sees as an “obscure chapter in the history of the world...” (Coetzee 34) which he wishes to obliterate and start afresh with no more injustice or pain but immediately says that “fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages...” (Coetzee 34) are not his ways. He feels the need to struggle with the old story hoping to reveal to him something until it is finished. He wishes to explore to prick of his consciousness.

Magistrate's association with the barbarian girl furthers him with his exploration. He takes her under his care and decides to hand her over to her own people. His fear of being no different than the tortures and his male chauvinism offsets his pursuit to unmask the veil of knowledge. His nascent ethical viewpoint is eventually rendered stunted, a process which Coetzee develops more intensely in case of Mrs. Curren. The barbarian girl's body to him, lying close to him and yet faraway as if beyond his comprehension forces him to interrogate his desire. With other woman he could easily pierce through her interior in an ecstatic storm but the barbarian girl does not give him that freedom to seek entry into her freely "as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (Coetzee 59). He tries to recall her face by seeing through her scars of torture. This can be seen as a symbolic failure on the magistrate's part in bringing together the wraths of history within the ambit of his psyche or understanding. At one point he says, "Is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?" (Coetzee 88). As the novel ends the magistrate's situation at having been lost is shown clearly as he cries "to understand the zone in which you live." (Coetzee 168).

Coetzee's ethically troubled white narrators and his ethically minded politics represent the positions of myth, morality, violence, conscious and history within an interminable mesh of signification and bringing about a critique of rationality and skepticism of any power wielding positions. To comprehend and question violence and politics then becomes a demanding task both by the author and the reader. Coetzee's rationale behind unmaking violence which comes with a critique of rationality, ultimately, makes it politically and ethically implicated. Coetzee's fictions are not just theoretically developing upon the concepts of violence, ethics and politics but also seek to establish as experiential base without disengaging the narrators from the field of actual confrontation. Whether it is psychologically traumatized Eugene Dawn, morally lost

magistrate or ethically driven Mrs. Curren their identities are essentially disintegrated and therefore experience becomes an important part of their consciousness.

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